(ibidem) Planum Readings

#08
2017/2

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Planum Publisher

(ibidem)
Planum Readings

by Planum. The Journal of Urbanism
Supplemento al n. 35, vol. II/2017
ISSN 1723-0993
Registered by the Court of Rome on 04/12/2001
Under the number 514-2001

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(ibidem) è un progetto ideato da Marco Cremaschi.

Impaginazione: Francesco Curci
Progetto grafico: Nicola Vazzoler
Immagine di copertina:
Centrale termica a concentrazione solare, Ivanpah, California
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Editoriale

Incontri

Letture

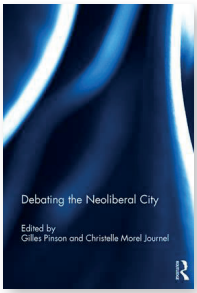
Prima Colonna

Scrivere una recensione significa letteralmente passare in rassegna, cioè riconoscere pregi e difetti di un'opera scorrendo per intero le sue pagine, percorrendo con gli occhi quelle righe del testo che Ivan Illich paragonava ai filari di una vigna. L'atto di recensire, dunque, è il modo di esprimere un giudizio fondato anzitutto sulla lettera del testo e solo secondariamente sul contesto. Nel suo acuto editoriale, Scira Menoni prende le distanze da un sistema di valutazione dei prodotti scientifici che finisce per dare maggiore importanza al contesto invece che al testo. L'uso dei cosiddetti parametri bibliometrici, per esempio, ricava il valore di un testo scientifico dalla sua relazione con una testata editoriale e con altri testi dai quali è citato. La reputazione sostituisce la conoscenza diretta del testo da parte di un valutatore esperto.
Con le sue modestissime possibilità, (ibidem) difende la valutazione in prima persona, discrezionale finché si vuole, ma basata sulle ragioni del testo. La nostra scelta di quali libri recensire non è certo neutrale, come non lo è la scelta dei recensori ai quali affidare il compito. Su (ibidem) favoriamo un confronto aperto tra libri e persone che formano il loro giudizio attraverso la lettura. Chi ci segue sa inoltre che su (ibidem) non diamo importanza alle barriere disciplinari. È benvenuto chi scrive in un modo penetrante di questioni urbane. Il sapere della città è tanto poco circoscrivibile quanto lo sono i processi di urbanizzazione planetaria di cui parla Neil Brenner. Cosa è l'urbanità al giorno d'oggi? Gabriele Pasqui se lo chiede leggendo il libro più recente di Giancarlo Consonni. La risposta non è alla portata di un singolo sapere, né forse lo è mai stata. La lettura deve seguire le tracce di urbanità liberamente, fin là dove esse la conducono.

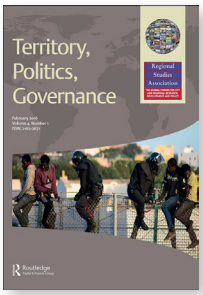
L.G.

Marco Cremaschi

Built Leviathans: Deciphering Urban Change throughout the Neoliberal Decades



Gilles Pinson and Christelle Morel Journel (eds.)
Debating the Neoliberal City
Routledge, London & New York 2017
pp. 220, £ 105.00



Gilles Pinson and Christelle Morel Journel (eds.)
The Neoliberal City.
Theory, Evidence, Debates
Territory, Politics, Governance, 4(2), 2016
pp. 127, free online access

The collection of studies published by Routledge (PMJ17) and the special section of the RSA journal *Territory, Politics, Governance* (PMJ16), both edited by Pinson and Morel Journel, jointly aim to analyse how the scientific literature on cities has dealt with neoliberalism and the neoliberalisation process.

On one side, neoliberal urbanism is an epochal turning point, a new model for cities' development. The global urbanism of new cities in emergent countries – like Masdar, Songdo, Gurgaon (Sidewalk Toronto as a proxy) – is seemingly its herald. The spreading mantra of entrepreneurialism, competitiveness and smartness seems tangibly embodied by these new models.

On the other side, neoliberal urbanism is a long-lasting transition, new assemblages are being formed of both old and new technical and governance tools, well inscribed at the core of old western societies. Large urban projects have in fact played an important part in the story of neo-liberalism, building up a narrative of city entrepreneurialism, privatisation and finance (Hall and Hubbard 1998). In the 90s, the formula of the 'urban renaissance' well captured the emerging message: flagship projects, international events, capital flows, the redevelopment of 'central' areas, and the establishment of growth coalitions.

The editors highlight a few major virtues of the debate on urban neoliberalism, but issue strong cautions against some consistent pitfalls, in particular at naïve generalisations and empirical inconsistencies (that hints – in my view – to the worst flaws of academic work, namely conformism, inconsistency, mannerism).

Within this piece, I will, after a short introduction, try to squeeze the juice of the many and varied contributions assembled in the two publications into four passages, firstly discussing how they assumed their theoretical stance, critical position, interpretations of change and empirical analyses; before deliberately 'provincializing' the discussion questioning the importance of this debate for an

Italian reader.
However, I owe the reader of these lines a formal acknowledgement, beyond my commitment to rigorousness, of my firm sympathy and proximity for the editors' and several of the authors' endeavours.

Hundreds of new cities

Not by hazard, the book's introduction starts by quoting the story of a failed attempt to establish a new model city in Honduras, following the suggestions of US scholar Romer, now the World Bank's chief economist. After a TED talk in 2009 (Romer 2009), the then Honduras' barely legitimate president asked Romer to help set up the first charter city, an honour he eventually declined due to the lack of transparency of the whole administration. Of late, an update on the renewed effort by the Honduras government made clear that: «It is not going well» (*The Economist*, August 12th 2017). Charter cities are clearly indebted to the legendary Peter Hall's policy recommendation in 1977 of the 'free zones' (Yardeleyaug 2014), a hypothetical tool to spur growth by reducing taxes and regulations in blighted urban areas. Both models later elaborated on the success stories of the 80s Asian tigers (Taiwan, South Korea…) and the late 90s development of a few city-states (Dubai, Singapore, Hong Kong…). The enterprise zone and similar exceptional policy tools are indeed among the original policies of neoliberal urbanism (Rossi, Vanolo 2015).
However, this trend is indeed increasing, and hundreds of new cities are under construction today. As late as September 2017, the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund announced the plan to build NEOM (Shahine *et al.* 2017), a new city the size of a small country on the border of Jordan, in addition to ongoing developments, all heavily relying on a mixture of new technologies and authoritarian regime (Hertog 2017). There is a plan to connect it to Egypt by a long bridge over the Red Sea. The intention is that all services and processes will be 100% fully automated, with the goal of «becoming the most efficient destination in the world». These cities seem a good example of an entrepreneurial approach (Moser *et al.* 2015).
This initial little anecdote, and the intricate intellectual story that unfolds, illustrates a few of the elements of interest within this timely book. Neoliberal cities have been the object of a theoretical quest for a long time. At the same time, they are around us in growing numbers, the material output of socially rooted forces.
Not surprisingly, such a sea change of transformation raises concerns that are at the same time both political and epistemological. Scholars have elaborated models and theories; policy makers have adopted and reworked them; both have been experimenting with policy tools at length; research on the variety of cases is still lacking dramatically.
However, how do we 'see' these cases? Are all these developments unequivocally neoliberal? What do they have in common? Does what we consider as new depend on real world changes, does it depend on ideology, or does it arise from a better and enhanced analytical understanding of long-term trends? These are certainly not new questions. Yet, depending on our answers, our analyses will project profoundly different ideological answers. This book is timely in setting the debate on urban neoliberalism at the crossroad of these more general questions.

Not only neoliberal

Provisionally defined by the curators as «the set of intellectual streams and policy orientations that strive to extend market mechanisms and relations» (PMJ17, p. 2), the debate on neoliberalism is structured in the introduction as well as in a few theoretical papers (mostly collected in PMJ16).
Pointing at the plus side, the editors emphasise that the neoliberal metaphor has brought together seemingly disparate features of urban development into the robust frame of a unitary process. The book defends for instance the overall intellectual project of connecting several late capitalist developments (financialisation, competitiveness, technicalisation, non-democratic procedures…). The undisputable appeal of the neoliberal thesis is due to the unmistakeable virtues of a long stream of theoretical contributions (Brenner, Peck & Theodore 2010; Harvey 2007; Swyngedouw *et al.* 2002, to name just a few). For sure they arose compelling theoretical questions, not always addressed by the appeased stream of urban research that followed, qualifying all late policy interventions as equally

neoliberal (from Barcelona's events to the BRT in Rio de Janeiro).
On the negative side, the editors ask whether this corpus of theories offers a good explanatory framework, and try to make the point that neoliberalism is an ambiguous term, however this is not obvious when tackling urban change. Though fertile, the model of the 'neoliberal city' is far too general. Therefore the aim of the editors is to overcome the idea of neoliberalism as a unique and consistent state of the world, and of stable coalitions as its universal model of dealing with urban decisions.
Though the book and the special section of the journal do not explicitly state these tasks, and as they do not provide a conclusive chapter, I will try to synthetize the wealth of critical contributions addressed by the curators looking in order at:
a) criticizing the tendency to use neoliberalism as an all-encompassing theoretical *passepartout* ('an omnipotent independent variable', PMJ17, p. 25), the editors call for a more considered, robust and historically grounded approach;
b) reviewing the vast theoretical debate that has spread in the last three decades, the editors argue against the theoretical confusion of a large part of the literature;
c) circumscribing the extent of change induced by neoliberal forces, they pinpoint at the other factors (institutions and actors) that cannot be neglected; and finally:
d) establishing the analytical prerequisites for proper empirical developments, they hint to the directions that can enhance current and more suited research programs.

An archaeology of the future

Urban neoliberalism is an old story, and an intellectual construction, which has taken time and effort to materialize, but was ignited by concerns with urban developments in very western, very domestic cities (London and New York *in primis*). The editors' work is reminiscent of historians' work on the archaeology of neoliberalism, whose long-standing intellectual roots have required decades to unfold, since the Lippman conference in 1938.
This is a long story that is far more nuanced than implied by these examples. A mix of ideology and privatisation as well as state rolling back and adaptation. Liberalism in particular is not only a libertarian pro-market choice, but also a political project of hegemony over the state.
However, the framework of neoliberalism has rapidly spread, becoming somehow the model of urban development, and the model for understanding urban developments.
Looking at current urban developments is a major theoretical challenge; indeed research programs that fail in identifying crucial theoretical and methodological tenets lead to pushed comparisons and inconsistent conclusions.
A strong criticism concerns the lack of attention to individual trajectories and local combinations; instead, a research program is possible which is based on an empirical investigation on the role of urban enterprises and urban '*ensembliers*' (Lorrain in PMJ17).
An explanatory framework which does not concede room for interpreting contingencies and the autonomy of the actors, enterprises and governments alike (Halpern and Pollard in PMJ17), whilst the importance is growing of understanding how actors fail and succeed in such an increasingly complex environment.
Marketization and liberalisation are not the only results of the complexification of urban governance under neoliberalism (Raco, Street & Freire Trigo, both in PMJ16 and PMJ17); firms and urban entrepreneurs are not only burdened by increasing recommendations and rules, but they also profit of a hyper regulated market in certain conditions.

The king is naked

The editors are clearly critical of some of the aspects of the theoretical framework provided thus far. Additionally, several of the authors involved in the book explicitly defy this explanatory framework, questioning both the quality and the irretrievable functionalism of the generalisation.
However, all the papers are very careful in clarifying merits and faults of the debate, often quoting the perplexities expressed by Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010, p. 184) that noted that neoliberalism has become «something of a rascal concept (promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently con-

tested)».
A double problem arises: some of the theoretical features imputed to neoliberalism are in fact liberal in principle, and some of the empirical features of the neoliberalisation process are in turn either misinterpreted or questionable (both Le Galès and Storper in PMJ16).
Le Galès, who won the 2017 Regional Studies Association Best Paper Award with this paper, made a clear point that confusion is overwhelming, and neoliberalism «has been referred to as a great *deus ex machina* without much qualification» (PMJ16, p. 156). The debate on neoliberalism shows an epistemological pitfall, that is «a contradiction between a rather deterministic macro framework relying upon a very fluid and constructivist definition of neoliberalism and confusion about the relationship between liberalism, globalized capitalism, and neoliberalism» (*ibidem*).
Storper (PMJ16, p. 242) agrees on the point that «by failing to master theories of liberalism, much of the neo-liberalism literature attributes virtually all de-regulation, *laissez faire*, tolerance of inequality, cronyism, and oligarchic behaviour as outgrowths of liberalism itself […]. This failure leads the critical neo-liberalism literature to make pervasive errors in evaluating and labelling real world public policies».
Aside from these concerns, and somehow midway between political economy and neo-institutionalism, Reigner (PMJ16, p. 221) adopts a Foucauldian approach to enlighten the governance of individual behaviours. Her analysis delves the spreading use of morality «as a powerful democratic anaesthetic» in the case of sustainable mobility policies in France. In this view, neoliberalism is a state project aimed at generalising market behaviour and at restructuring users' individual responsibility. Deploying moral injunctions, such a discourse prevents criticizing «the chains of arguments linking the problems and the solutions» (ibidem, p. 210), limits the debate to the efficacy of policies and leads eventually to the depoliticization of actions.

A baggy orthodoxy

Even compared with a close analysis of urban projects, the all-encompassing explanation does not hold true. Since the nineties, many countries have experienced the proliferation of large urban projects.
In what sense would urban controversies epitomise, then, a linear trend in privatisation, a growing market domination, the eradication of government privileges?
They do not, as Storper claimed. A closer view to empirical changes requires in fact substantial corrections to the overall framework, «[i]ndeed, on balance the evidence suggests a steady increase in public sector investments, public goods and regulation in urban and regional affairs, and this is a worldwide phenomenon» (Storper PMJ16, p. 243). On the contrary, changes in European cities teach us of a complex process of repoliticisation (Cremaschi 2014); they talk about a complex reformulation of the politics of governing urban processes. The point is that we do not have a linear interpretation of progress, but rather multiple and not always compatible scales to evaluate a number of changes (technological, environmental, social, economic) occurring at the same time.
Some of the authors of the book – though keener to adopt the neoliberal explanatory framework – introduce in fact articulate corrections.
The 'moral zoning' at the basis of neoliberalism can be interpreted in a Foucauldian approach as the furtherance of the historical penchant of all 'right wing' urban politics, well before and throughout the 70s turn. Furthermore, it illustrates the uncomfortable position of any European viewer and urbanist in particular, since neoliberal urbanism disrupts the historical model of reconciling cohesion and competitiveness (Ranci in PMJ17) that characterised social democracy and the European urban model.
In doing so, neoliberal urbanism manifests a fluid yet disturbing capacity of absorbing diverging claims, such as for instance sustainability and the environment (Béal in PMJ17) and somehow morphing in new policy combinations.

Back to reality

The definition of a neoliberal urbanism (Hackworth 2007) tends to concur with the general model of entrepreneurialism (Rossi and Vanolo 2015). In last decade, a few empirical analyses of these projects have produced some generalisations,

with the major aim of discussing urban entrepreneurialism as a significant challenge to govern in neoliberal times.

Part of the empirical research has been devoted to reconstructing how an institutional framework and the socio-political dynamics of the city embed these projects. Urban projects are multifaceted processes: complexity and framing effects defined them (Salet, Gualini 2007). For instance, researchers pinpointed the risk factors of their critical dimensions, the democratic deficit in the decision making process, the uncertainty of outcomes and a random recourse to technical forecasting.

Institutional framing, size, elitism and corporatism, technical uncertainty: urban projects show all the usual elements of classical sociotechnical controversies, i.e. the convergence point between uncertainty and disagreement (Callon *et al.* 2009), between politics (the consensus arena) and techniques (the instrumentalisation arena: Venturini 2008). Not surprisingly, empirical research tends to show wider results than those implied by the neoliberal framework, well beyond the issue of adaptation and policy mobility.

China has been obviously a hot case. Fulong Wu (in PMJ17) picks up precisely from the intersection of Harvey and Ong, with the premise that the state is an active actor engaging with the market through its 'entrepreneurial activities'. However, «state entrepreneurialism… does not aim to create the 'neoliberal city» (p. 157). Wu questions whether Chinese governance is a move away from the Keynesian state, or more about «the state selectively adopting market instruments to achieve its own goal of capital accumulation» (p. 170), echoing here Storper's broader arguments. Cities not being actors, the research need to deconstruct state and political logics, as well those of the other agents involved.

Also, Marisol Garcia (in PMJ17) argues against the neoliberal framework for interpreting the Spanish case, mostly on account of the historical specificities of the countries, namely the specialisation on housing provision; the complex interplay between local parties and municipalism; the decentralisation of central functions; and the role of family support as far as housing and social welfare are concerned. In short, most of the privatising features of state policies predate neoliberalism and are not sustained by a neoliberal discourse: rather they respond to the classical model of the Mediterranean 'privatised Keynesianism' (p. 177).

Four questions from the Italian debate

Urbanism is a common field between social scientists, planners and designers; more than by the object, these traditions or disciplines seem today divided by approach, methodology, ethic and style of reasoning. An urgent challenge is to clarifying how we produce knowledge not *thanks to* but *from* these traditions and disciplines, and on which stands we aim at influencing practices.

Should researchers in cultural contexts less exposed to this debate (Béal in PMJ17) deal with the problems and criticisms summarised by Pinson and Morel Journel? On a more practical dimension, are urban policies of Italian cities unaffected by late neoliberal developments, as one could expect following Aalbers (PMJ17 and 2013), for whom right wing policies come from a long past? Or are these policies evenly neoliberal, as specifically argued by D'Albergo and Moini (2015), for whom continuities are apparent in the case of Rome all along different political mandates?

These are crucial questions for practitioners and scholars. There is no doubt that the literature on neoliberal urbanism has scarcely invigorated the Italian debate, with a few notable exceptions and precursors that I will mention later. There are undeniable traces of a proud isolationism, even more culpable if one thinks of the original contribution that Italian urban researchers have given to urban sociology in the 60s, neo-Marxism in the 70s, institutional economy in the 80s, or to the study of informal economy and the organised crime's territorial power all over those decades.

I will tentatively couple the already discussed issues of theory, critique, interpretation of change and empirical analysis with some of the intellectual positions present in the Italian debate, with the hope that this may lead to a fruitful cross fertilisation.

The major theoretical discussion in the last years in Italy has concerned the role of spatial design and of urban projects as opposed to the tradition of planning. Coherently with the evolving nature of neoliberalism, this led to subsequent waves of

experimenting with partnerships, landscape, sustainability, and more recently, culture, re-cycling and the smart city. However, this concern, while vindicating the role of space, keeps underestimating the theoretical problem of the role and position of actors.

A critical concern affects this position in a paradoxical way: being radically critical, it seems oblivious of the need of articulating and positioning the critique. This second view sees in neoliberalism the culmination of whatever negative comes from the capitalist order; as Ferguson (2010, p. 171, quoted in Storper in PMJ16) puts it, neoliberalism becomes «…. a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself or as a kind of shorthand for the world economy and its inequalities». This may imply some consequential misapprehensions, for instance when the State as the whole is rehabilitated as it were a natural antonym of capitalism. This is hardly a tenable position, being the State an integral part of the process of neoliberalisation, on one side; and an effective deterrent in some cases, though with mixed results (Pinson and Morel in PMJ17).

From this, a third position arises, addressing many questions like: how to conceive policy actions that will be just, equitable and considerate? How to deal with the interpretation of change? A frank discussion of the new operational conditions of urban planning has notably been misled for an accommodating stance towards neoliberalism itself. Re-asserting the quest for a technical role of planners, however, this position fails consequently to investigate the clashes between political and technical rationalities. Of late, STS notably re-asserted the need to discuss the strategic mixing up of technical and political reasons. One does not have to follow entirely the hyper-constructivism of the assemblage theory to acknowledge that this issue stands at the core of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, and that should be more investigated.

Finally, a fourth position embraces the need to analyse the morphing of both state and market, technical and political rationalities, system and actors into new assemblages; but one has to admit that there is a lack of empirical developments, either on the direction of the governance arrangements or of the new socio-technical assemblages.

«Heraclitus cubed and worse»

This debate shows with evidence that everything is changing, urban governance as well as the materiality of cities, as well as the need of interpreting change.

Neoliberal urbanism is part of the problem: it is developing a complex structure of land rights, characterised by lengthy negotiations on unbalanced public and private spaces. Materials and power relations have changed, as well as narratives, moralities and rationalities. When considering current cities' projects, researchers have to deal with profound ideological images, deeply rooted inside the common wisdom of urban policies.

Policies have evolved too, and to some extent, the cognitive understanding of these difficult policy assemblages. There is in fact a significant difficulty in comparing values and benefits and respecting a 'fair exchange' between developers and public regulators: in practical terms, public authorities are all too often unable to evaluate or negotiate cross-investments, even less so in the most complex redevelopment operations.

We need to focus on how researchers are dealing with change. Let's face it, it is not an easy task: «the problem is that more has changed, and more disjointly, than one at first imagines» (Geertz 1995, p. 1). The anthropologist advices also that disciplines, researchers themselves and the entire world that includes them have changed, as well as the sense «of what is available from life» (*ibidem*, p. 2).

What is left, once more, is the responsibility to «produce a sense of how thing go» (*ibidem*, p. 3). There are no shortcuts, but the old imperative remains to connect both individual and collective imagination. Concurrently, the potential mistakes have changed; one has to avoid the symmetrical risks of the historicist 'false necessity' on one side, and the positivist analytical scientism on the other. A responsible disciplinary answer has to provide an empirical challenge to such conflictual hegemonic projects as the old social-democratic regulatory system of planning, and the new mantra of market and international development. The need of all-encompassing metanarratives seems hard to die, and can be counterproductive: once more, if everything is neoliberal, then neoliberalism is nothing.

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